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ABSTRACT

Findings of a survey conducted in 1989 to identify the difficulties facing educational practitioners when initiating shared decision making in school-based management are presented in this educational policy bulletin. The first of a two-issue report examined five of the eight major barriers to changing traditional behavior: fear of taking risks, fear of losing power, resistance to changing roles and responsibilities, lack of trust, and lack of definition and clarity. The last three obstacles--inadequate or inappropriate resources, lack of skills, and lack of hierarchical support--are discussed in this issue. A conclusion is that given the interdependent nature of the educational system, change at the school site level must be accompanied by change at all levels of the system. (LMI)

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Eight Barriers to Changing Traditional Behavior: Part Two

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Eight Barriers to Changing Traditional Behavior: Part Two

This issue concludes the report of a survey conducted in 1989 by Southwest Educational Development Laboratory to identify the difficulties facing educational practitioners when initiating shared decision making in school-based management. The March 1990 issue of INSIGHTS (Number 18) reported on five of the eight major barriers to changing traditional behavior that were derived from an analysis of survey findings: fear of taking risks, fear of losing power, resistance to changing roles and responsibilities, lack of trust, and lack of definition and clarity. The last three barriers—inadequate or inappropriate resources, lack of skills, and lack of hierarchical support—are discussed in this issue.

Inadequate or Inappropriate Resources

Thirty-eight percent of the SEDL survey respondents stated that lack of resources or inappropriate resource allocation represents a serious barrier to successful implementation of shared decision making. This sixth barrier to changing traditional behavior was discussed by respondents in three distinct categories:

- time
- staff
- money

It is significant to note that fully two-thirds of the responses in this category focused on the need for time, while only a few respondents specified staff and even fewer specified money.

In discussing the need for time, one survey respondent stated, "A major challenge is finding quality time for local staff to address the change process. Traditional organizational models simply do not provide time." Respondents described a variety of distinct needs for time that are difficult to meet in the typical school day, e.g., time to scan and collect ideas regarding "new ways of doing things," time for training in new skills, time for decision-making bodies to meet, and time

to "play out the group dynamic" that is necessary to ensure that sound consensus decision making takes place. This daily time barrier is crucial because most of the people who need to be involved in the work of shared decision making at the site are already engaged in full-time work. The typical teacher's work day provides minimal teaching preparation time and even less time for meetings with colleagues. In addition, most parents and community members are committed to full work days and work weeks. Under current patterns of time allocation in schools, participation in shared decision making often is a cost rather than a benefit to teachers (Firestone & Corbett, 1988), other staff, and working parents.

Time in the longer term was also discussed. One respondent noted that "the process takes significantly more time to institutionalize than the literature implies." Another discussed the difficulty inherent in pursuing any type of far-reaching change in the educational system, where "training for change [must be accomplished] while maintaining the operation of schools and the school system." Two other time factors that affect implementation in the longer term are: (1) time is needed to explore and understand the process itself prior to implementation, and (2) time must be provided for shared decision making to be

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"learned and practiced until it becomes a natural behavior."

The second resource—staff—was discussed in terms of the human resource issues that arise from implementing shared decision making. One respondent stated that successful shared decision making requires the "selection of creative/innovative school staff members with positive attitudes and high expectations for disadvantaged children." This suggests that successful implementation of the strategy depends on including or developing personnel who can contribute these strengths to the process. Another respondent stated that "the person who must initiate change [i.e., principal or superintendent] may not be a change agent." The process and results of shared decision making also can require changes in how personnel are deployed (particularly support people, e.g., paraprofessionals and secretaries), suggesting that typical school staffing patterns or static schedules may present difficulties at the site.

Most of the respondents who discussed the third resource—money—described a need to increase or reallocate funds for staff development activities. Only one respondent stated there was a need to finance higher pay for teachers; all others focused on the "tremendous amount of training that school participants need, aimed at attitudinal change and learning new skills."

Lack of Skills

The seventh barrier to changing traditional behavior toward shared decision making encompasses the need to develop current human resources at the school and district levels. Thirty percent of SEDL survey respondents reported a critical lack of knowledge and skills needed for successful shared decision making at their sites. Respondents asserted that site participants require skills to move from "individual thinking to collective thinking" and that faculties need to be able to move from "isolated working and decision

making patterns to [those of] group decision making." Survey responses clustered into three areas of need:

- knowledge
- decision-making skills
- collaborative skills

According to survey respondents, the knowledge needed by shared decision-making participants includes information about the strategy itself—both the philosophy and "research evidence of the efficacy of this management mode." Organizational theory and change theory also are needed to provide participants with a context for implementation and an understanding of its implications. All stakeholders, including the community at large, need to be given a clear rationale for the implementation of shared decision making. Those making decisions at the school site need a clear charge and operational ground rules, and they need to be provided with all information relevant to specific site decision-making tasks.

Survey respondents stated that decision-making skills are needed by site participants in the following areas: developing a vision or mission statement, leadership, problem solving and critical thinking, strategic planning, priority setting, resource utilization, and the design of accountability and evaluation plans.

Collaborative skills needed by participants include conflict resolution, communication, commitment building, and team building skills. The unique difficulty in achieving shared decision making was highlighted when nearly one-fourth of the respondents in this category focused on the lack of experience in consensus decision making among their site participants. Decision making by consensus demands skills very different from those required in decision making by vote.

In discussing site participants' lack of knowledge and skills, SEDL survey respondents offered a variety of ideas regarding how

participants can best gain new knowledge and skills at the site. Ideas ranged from the use of professional consultants or experienced facilitators to effectively guide participants on-site; to taking a train-the-trainer approach, with selected staff undergoing training and then returning to the site to train their faculties and communities; to taking an "immersion" approach in which all staff participate in gathering information, gaining decision-making skills, and developing collaborative behaviors.

Lack of Hierarchical Support

The final barrier to changing traditional behavior is lack of hierarchical support. Twenty-seven percent of SEDL survey respondents discussed four different aspects of this barrier:

- absence of full-system commitment to shared decision making
- conflicts with outside regulations
- transience of personnel
- inadequate communication

A majority of respondents who discussed this barrier stated that their site lacked hierarchical support in the form of broad and permanent commitment to the process of shared decision making. SEDL survey respondents asserted the need for full support from all "high level" district stakeholders, including central office staff, the superintendent, and the school board. Full-system commitment was defined by one respondent as including institution-wide preparation for the change prior to implementation and a commitment to acting on shared decision-making concepts and underlying assumptions.

The need also for hierarchical commitment *beyond* the district was stated as follows by one respondent: "Perhaps my biggest frustration has been the lack of support from state educational officials. The move towards shared governance also means an increase in flexibility from state rules and regulations." Indeed, a number of respondents cited the

need to resolve conflicts with outside regulations. One respondent described difficulty in "achieving a balance between district requirements and school-level initiatives" while another described state mandates as impeding "constructive progress because they are too confining, inflexible, and limiting."

Respondents named transience of district personnel as a major problem. Each incoming superintendent or board member has the potential to bring with him or her a new perception of shared decision making. The result is often devastating. One respondent stated, "as new managers have risen to positions of leadership many of the main features of the original decentralized system have eroded and decision making is more centralized now than it was at the start." Equally damaging consequences are found at the school site when the school-based management team is affected by principal and teaching staff transfers and parent/family mobility.

Finally, many of the respondents reported problems with communication—a difficulty that may mark an insufficiently committed district. The uni-directional communication pattern typically present in traditional schools and districts does not facilitate shared planning and decision making. Even a two-way pattern between central office and school site, and between principal and teachers, is insufficient. The need for a multi-directional communication network was described by one survey respondent who advocated the creation of "new communications mechanisms within schools and from schools to [the] community and back."

Conclusion

Implementation of school-based management and shared decision making is an attempt to replace centralized reform efforts with strategies that will better serve students and the total learning community. Schools and districts that attempt to restructure their

authority and decision-making arrangements should expect to encounter personal, interpersonal, and institutional barriers to change erected by beliefs and traditions deeply held by school and community members. Analysis of the results of SEDL's 1989 survey of educational practitioners identified eight major barriers: *fear of taking risks, fear of losing power, resistance to changing roles and responsibilities, lack of trust, lack of definition and clarity, inadequate or inappropriate resources, lack of skills, and lack of hierarchical support.*

The SEDL survey found that school-based-management and shared decision-making strategies directly challenge and seek to change the complex and well-entrenched patterns of institutional and individual behavior that Timar & Kirp (1987) contend have remained untouched by top-down reforms. Survey findings also illustrate the interconnectedness of the individual school with every other part of the educational system. Local schools are embedded in the larger educational system, and barriers to change exist throughout the system—not only within the school but also within the district, the community, and the state. Change at the school level must be accompanied by changes at all levels of the system in order for school-based management and shared decision making to realize their full potential.

A future issue of INSIGHTS will discuss ways in which the educational system can

overcome barriers to changing traditional behavior and maximize the potential for school-based management and shared decision making to produce more effective schools and better student learning outcomes.

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